

## A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN USE OF BILINGUAL STRATEGIES AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY'S LEARNERS OF FRENCH

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**Abstract:** This study examines the relationship between students' use of bilingual strategies and their academic performance in the Department of Business French of Assumption University (AU). A quantitative approach was adopted. The study includes a sample of 63 students learning French in AU. A questionnaire was elaborated to collect data about the frequency of use of bilingual strategies and the academic performance of students. Descriptive and correlational statistics, including a Pearson Product Moment computation of correlation, were used to interpret the data and measure the significance of the correlation between the two sets of variables. The results indicated that a high frequency of use of bilingual strategies is correlated with high academic performances. Some recommendations grounded in the results are proposed in conclusion.

**Keywords:** Bilingualism, Language Learning Strategies, Academic Performance, Cross-Linguistic Similarities, English, French

### Introduction

Various researches have been conducted on how bi/plurilingualism affects the learning process and how it can favor the development of effective learning language strategies. The European Framework of References for languages (Council of Europe [COE], 2001) suggested that plurilingualism, defined as "a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact" (p.4) is a cognitive and metacognitive advantage for language learners.

Bilingualism, which is the most common case of plurilingualism, is an ability to mobilize knowledge previously acquired in a L1 for learning and using a L2 (Moore, 2006). This competence is observable through the use of specific learning language strategies relying on previously acquired knowledge (Castellotti & Moore, 2002), and is particularly effective in improving learning when the target language is close to the previously acquired language, as it is the case for French and English.

This research took place in the Department of Business French of Assumption University, which is a bilingual learning environment. The students in this program need to be proficient in English, which is the main teaching language of the university, as well as in French. They are generally more proficient in English than in French. Our hypothesis is that, unlike learners of Chinese or Japanese, AU's learners of French possess an advantage for learning due to the linguistic proximity of French

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and English. This proximity can facilitate the learning of French and arouse the use of specific strategies, relying on English. Therefore, a frequent use of bilingual strategies by learners should result in higher academic performances.

The following questions were addressed: what bilingual strategies are used by the French learners of AU, and with what degree of frequency? Is the degree of frequency of use of bilingual strategies significantly correlated with high academic performance?

### **Research objectives**

The objectives of the study were:

1. To measure the frequency of use of bilingual strategies by AU's learners of French.
2. To examine the relationship between learners of French's use of bilingual strategies and their academic performance.

Some recommendations for a didactic optimization of the proximity between French and English are provided in conclusion.

### **Literature review**

#### *The notion of bi/plurilingualism*

The Common European Framework of References for languages (COE, 2001) defined the bi/plurilingual competence as an ability to communicate in more than one language according to the communication situation. A plurilingual speaker "can call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor" (p.4). This competence supposes knowledge and therefore learning of several languages at different levels. It is defined by Coste, Moore and Zarate (2009) as "the ability to use languages for the purpose of communication (...), where a person, viewed as a social actor has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages (...)" (p.11).

Bilingualism is the most frequent case of plurilingualism. It is not seen as a balanced set of advanced skills in two different languages, but rather as an ability to use two languages, with varying degrees of proficiency. It is "not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw" (COE, 2001, p.168). Bilingualism supposes the availability of linguistic knowledge that can be used in communication situations and for facilitating the learning of new languages. It supposes the transfer of skills and knowledge acquired in one language to another language being learned.

According to Laurent Gajo (2001), bilingualism is a potential asset for learners, which allows them to compensate the lacks in the competences that are necessary for communication (linguistic, sociolinguistic, *etc.*), by mobilizing knowledge and skills acquired in another language. It is a capacity to rely on preexisting linguistic knowledge to ensure communication in a foreign language.

Daniele Moore (2006) associates bilingualism with a metalinguistic knowledge fostering the development of transversal skills, reusable in different languages, and resulting in a better ability to apprehend a language, and to construct new knowledge.

A bilingual is therefore seen as a language user and learner having a cognitive and metacognitive advantage for language learning and communication. This advantage will be mostly effective in the case where the two languages are close. As pointed by Ringbom and Jarvis (2007), the proximity between L1 and L2 can be conceived as an entrance in L2 for learners proficient in L1. “Perceiving and making use of cross-linguistic similarities to prior knowledge is important in the learner’s striving to facilitate the learning task.” (p.106).

### *Proximity between languages*

If the proximity between languages can facilitate the learning of one of these language, it is important to examine the extent to which English can be considered linguistically close to French.

According to the research project Ethnologue (Paul, Simons, Fennig, 2016), French and English belong to the Indo-European languages family, but French belongs to the Romance languages sub-family, while English is a Germanic language. Despite some differences, especially in terms of pronunciation, they possess a large number of similarities. Most of these similarities can be identified by English users learning French, and used to facilitate their learning, through the use of specific strategies. A non-exhaustive list of exploitable similarities is proposed below.

### *Lexical similarities*

Based on estimations (Paul et al., 2016), English has a lexical similarity of 27 percent with French. Both languages have the same Greek and Latin roots. This is particularly evident for academic and scientific words that are mutually comprehensible. Here are a few examples (*French/English*): *philosophie/philosophy*, *théâtre/theatre*, *université/university*, *biologie/biology*, *etc.* As illustrated in Table 1, prefixes and suffixes, inherited from Greek and Latin, provide regularities between the two languages and can facilitate comprehension and inferences on the form of new words.

**Table 1: Prefixes and Suffixes for French and English**

Prefix	English	French
<i>Anti-</i>	Antipathy	<i>Antipathie</i>
<i>Bi-</i>	Bilingual	<i>Bilingue</i>
<i>Inter-</i>	International	<i>International</i>
<i>Peri-</i>	Periodic	<i>Périodique</i>
Suffix (latin)	English	French
<i>-arius</i>	Military	<i>Militaire</i>
<i>-ismus</i>	Idealism	<i>Idéalisme</i>
<i>-tio</i>	Nation	<i>Nation</i>
<i>-osus</i>	Nervous	<i>Nerveux</i>

Baugh and Cable (2002) showed that English lexic and grammar were influenced by French, which was the language of the royal court in England from the XIIth to the XVth century. During this period, English borrowed massively to French vocabulary. (*forêt/forest*, *loisirs/leisure*, most of the words ending with –ous, ty, tion,

ture, ent). Due to the proximity of France and England, and to the role of English as an international language, French has equally borrowed a significant number of words to English.

#### Grammatical similarities

French and English possess similar syntax and grammar verb, which reduce the opacity between them. Both languages have auxiliaries, participles, active/passive voice, past/present/future tenses. As a result, even without any knowledge of French, an English user will be able to guess the function of the words, and eventually their meaning, in a French sentence. This is particularly clear in the following example, reported by Escudé and Janin (2010) to evaluate the mutual intelligibility of French with various other languages:

Le petit prince (French)

The little prince (English); *Chú bé hoàng tử* (Vietnamese) The French and English sentences are mutually comprehensible and show that for an English user, French has some degree of transparency, whereas, Vietnamese has not. As pointed by Odlin (2003) cross-linguistic similarities results in a multiplicity of contact points between languages. Similarities between French and English constitute entrances in the French language for learners/users of English, and can facilitate and accelerate their learning process.

#### *Bilingual learning strategies*

The cross-linguistic similarities between English and French permit the use of specific learning strategies relying on previously acquired knowledge in English, when learning French. This type of strategies, involving skills in another language, will be referred to as bilingual learning strategies.

According to Oxford, (1990, p8), learning language strategies (LLS) are “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situation.” Bilingual learning strategies, therefore, are actions facilitating and improving language learning, and involving reliance on previously acquired knowledge and transfer of skills in different languages.

Based on Oxford (1990) initial classification, four types of bilingual learning strategies have been identified:

1. The cognitive and memorization strategies, which concern the handling, usage and memorization of the target language. These include all behaviors consisting in identifying the similarities behind the differences and specificities of languages, in a systematic way, for example, the identification of graphic and phonic regularities from English to French, or the use of inferences, based on knowledge in English. As an example, Escudé, Janin, (2010), showed that the learners can note that the words ending with *-té* in French, often ends with *-ty* in English (as an example: university/*université*), and reuse this knowledge for inferring the form of new knowledge in French.
2. The transfer strategies, which consist in transferring knowledge acquired in one language to another language being learned. It refers for example to the

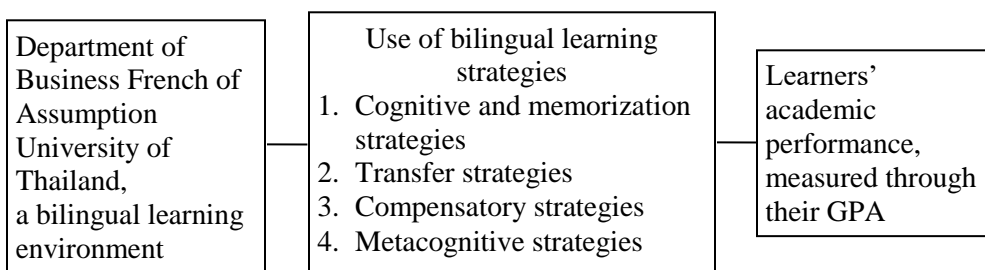
imitation of English patterns in the production of French text. These strategies result in interlingual performances in French, in which the reliance on English is perceptible. Interlingual performances are a step in the acquisition of a target language.

3. The compensatory strategies, which are used to overcome a lack of knowledge. These include for example code-switching techniques, with the aim to maintain communication during a conversation. Code switching, like the transfer strategies, must be considered as a step in language acquisition.
4. The metacognitive strategies, which concern the regulation and organization of learning. These include, for example, the ability to identify what techniques or what behaviors make language learning effective, and apply them to the learning of another language.

### Conceptual framework

This study aimed to examine the bilingual strategies used by Assumption University's learners of French and the relationship between their academic performances, measured through their GPA, and their frequency of use of ten bilingual learning strategies.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this study. The independent variables are the use of bilingual strategies by learners. The strategies are divided in 4 classes, 1/ cognitive and memorization, 2/ transfer, 3/ compensatory and 4/ metacognitive. The dependent variables are the academic performances of the students, which are measured through their GPA.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of The Study**

### Method/Procedure

#### *Sample strategy*

63 students enrolled in the Department of Business of Assumption University participated in the research. They completed the questionnaire the second week of the academic semester 1/2015. A convenience sampling method was adopted.

All the respondents were enrolled in the university for at least three semesters (see Table 2). All of them possess skills of varying degrees in French and English and can be, according to the definition given in the section 1, considered as bilingual

learners. The sampling strategy aimed to obtain a homogeneous sample of students in terms of academic background and languages proficiency.

**Table 2: Profile of The Respondents (N = 63)**

		Number	Percentage
Age	19	16	25.4
	20	25	39.7
	21	11	17.5
	22	6	9.5
	23	5	7.9
	<i>Total</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Gender	Women	57	90.5
	Men	6	9.5
	<i>Total</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Nationality	Thai	59	93.7
	Chinese	3	4.7
	Laotian	1	1.6
	<i>Total</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Number of semesters (mean = 4.2)	3	25	39.7
	4	16	25.4
	5	15	23.8
	6	7	11.1
Self-assessed level in English	<i>Total</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>100.0</i>
	Elementary	4	6.3
	Intermediary	32	50.8
Self-assessed level in French	Advanced	27	42.9
	<i>Total</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>100.0</i>
	Elementary	34	54.0
	Intermediary	25	39.7
	Advanced	4	6.3
	<i>Total</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>100.0</i>

### *Questionnaire*

In order to collect data on students' profile, on their academic performances and on their frequency of use of learning strategies, an anonymous questionnaire was designed. Various questionnaires to measure the frequency of use of learning languages strategies have been elaborated by researchers. The questionnaire used in this research is based on a review of the Strategies Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990), Cohen's (1990) questionnaire, and a review of researches on bilingualism, especially (Moore, 2006). Ten bilingual learning strategies have been identified and listed in the questionnaire (see Table 4 for the list of strategies).

The questionnaire is divided into two sections:

1. A first section focusing on the students' general profile. In this first section, the respondents were instructed to precise their Grade Point Average (GPA) in order to provide information on their academic performance.
2. A second section designed to collect information on the student's frequency

of use of bilingual learning strategies, in which previously learnt languages may play a role. This section focuses on the frequency of use of the cognitive, memorization, transfer, compensatory and metacognitive bilingual learning strategies. This part of the questionnaire is subdivided into nine items, each referring to a specific type of strategies. For each type of strategy, the respondents were asked to rate their frequency of use on a 5 points scale (1 = Never or almost never used; 5 = Always or almost always used).

In order to interpret the results, the following key was used.

4.5 – 5	Systematic use of strategies
3.5 – 4.49	Frequent use of strategies
2.5 – 3.49	Occasional use of strategies
1.5 – 2.49	Low use of strategies
1 – 1.49	Very low use of strategies

### *Procedure and data analysis*

The questionnaire has been distributed to students in class or through a form to complete online. 70 students were solicited, 63 answered.

In order to analyze the data, descriptive and correlational statistics, including a Pearson coefficient of correlation computation, were used.

## **Findings/Results**

### *Profile*

As reported in Table 2, the results of descriptive statistics showed that the totality of respondents were in the age between 19 and 23, with 17.4 percent aged 22 or more. With regards to gender, the large majority of the respondents were female students (n=57, 90.5%). Regarding the nationality, the large majority of the respondents were Thai (n=59, 93.7%). All the respondents were enrolled in the university for at least 2 semesters, and at most 6 semesters.

The results also indicate that the respondents self-assessed their level in English as more advanced than their level in French. A majority of them reported an intermediate level in English (n=32, 50.8%), and 42.8 percent of them (n=27) reported an advanced level. Only 6.3 percent (n=4) of them reported an elementary level. Concerning their level of French, their estimations are significantly lower. A majority of them reported an elementary level in French (n=34, 54%), and 39.7 percent of them (n=25) reported an intermediate level. Only 6.3 percent (n=4) of them reported an advanced level. The Table 2 presents these data.

The average GPA for the respondents is 2.9. As shown in Table 3. The lowest GPA is 1.85 and the highest is 3.94. 27 percent (n=17) of the respondents reported a GPA superior to 3.2, 44.4 percent (n=28) reported a GPA comprised between 2.5 and 3.19, 28.6 percent (n=18) reported a GPA inferior to 2.49.

**Table 3: GPA of The Respondents (N = 63)**

		Number	Percentage
GPA	High (3.2 – 3.94)	17	27.0

**Table 3: GPA of The Respondents (N = 63)**

	Number	Percentage
Average (2.5 – 3.19)	28	44.4
Low (1.85 – 2.49)	18	28.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>100.0</i>

*Frequency*

The results showed that the respondents have an occasional/frequent use of bilingual strategies. The average strategy use ranged from 1.4 to 4.6. The overall mean for the sample is 3.48.

As shown in Table 4, the most frequently used strategy is item 2 (“When learning French, I look for words in English that are similar to new words in French”), with a mean of 3.87 (frequent use). The least used is item8 (“During conversation or monologue in French, if I do not know the right word, I use words from English, but I add vowels or consonants so that they seem like words in French.”), with a mean of 2.98 (occasional use).

Regarding the class of strategies, we observe that the cognitive and memorization strategies (items 1, 2, 3, 4) are the most used, with a mean of 3.65, which related to a frequent use. These are followed by the metacognitive strategies (item 10), with a mean of 3.48 (occasional use), the transfer strategies (items 5, 6, 7) with a mean of 3.27 (occasional use) and the compensatory strategies (items 8, 9), with a mean of 3.09 (occasional use).

**Table 4: Frequency of Use of Bilingual Strategies (N = 63)**

	Strategies	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
1.	When learning French, I use my knowledge of English.	3.62	0.83	Frequent
2.	When learning French, I look for words in English that are similar to new words in French.	3.84	0.9	Frequent
3.	When reading in French, I make guess based on the resemblance of French words with English words.	3.73	0.83	Frequent
4.	I list words that are similar in French and English, so I can memorize them more easily.	3.42	0.99	Occasional
5.	I try to identify similarities between French and English grammar.	3.30	0.91	Occasional
6.	I try to find similar patterns between French and English sentence structures.	3.21	0.84	Occasional
7.	When writing in French, I imitate English patterns and text organization.	3.31	0.93	Occasional
8.	During conversation or monologue (a presentation for example) in French, if I do not know the right word, I use words from English, but I add vowels or consonants so that they seem like words in French.	2.97	0.99	Occasional
		3.21	0.88	Occasional



**Table 4: Frequency of Use of Bilingual Strategies (N = 63)**

	Strategies	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
9.	When speaking in French, I am likely to switch to English momentarily if I do not know a word.	3.48	0.76	Occasional
10.	When learning English, I try to identify practices that help me to learn effectively, and I reuse them when learning French.	3.49	0.89	Occasional
<i>Total</i>				

*Correlation*

The results showed a positive but weak correlation between respondent's academic performance, measured through their GPA, and their use of bilingual learning strategies. According to the findings reported in Table 5, the correlation between the two variables is .398, and significant value is 0.001, which is inferior to .05 significant levels.

**Table 5: Correlation between GPA and Frequency of Use of Bilingual Learning Strategies**

	Learners' GPA
Frequency of use of bilingual learning strategies	.398
Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.001

\* $p < 0.05$

**Discussion**

The purpose of the research was to identify the frequency of use of bilingual learning strategies of AU's learners of French, and to determine the relationship between their use of bilingual learning strategies and their academic performance. The results showed that AU's learners of French have an occasional/frequent use of bilingual learning strategies, and that there is a significant relationship between the two set of variables.

The results indicated that bilingual strategies users are more successful learner. Cross-linguistic similarities being an asset for language learning, it appears that raising learner's awareness of the proximity between languages, and making the most of this proximity for teaching purposes (Castellotti, Moore, 2002) could be a way to facilitate the learning of French for AU's students.

As an example of optimization of the proximity between languages, the dispositive Eurom-4 (Blanche-Benveniste, 1997) can be mentioned. This dispositive has been experimented in Europe in 1997, and allows learners to develop reading skills in four Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese) taught simultaneously. It is meant to help learners to build transversal skills in several languages, and help them to consolidate their plurilingual skills. A similar dispositive could be implemented in Assumption University with the creation of modules aiming to develop students reading skills in French and English taught simultaneously.

In addition to this setting, the creation of bilingual learning strategies training module, designed to encourage the students to rely on bilingual learning strategies,

could improve their language learning skills. This type of setting should help learners to make the most of their bilingual ability and improve simultaneously their skills in English and French. As pointed by the Council of Europe (2007) “all language teaching should include the development of learning strategies and not be seen as an end in itself” (p.69), which supposes that the language class should not be only the place where a language is taught, but a dispositive designed to develop the learning ability of students.

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